

# Inlays and Boulle



Hexagonal Dutch inlay occasional table



Ebony and ivory inlay parquetry occasional table

Cabinets were first recorded in England in the 16th century. In 1578 a German traveller visiting the court of Queen Elizabeth I at Whitehall Palace noted her 'two little cabinets of exquisite work'. Her cabinets were for the storage of papers and no doubt were primarily her writing boxes.

In the 16th century, ornate ebony cabinets were referred to as *schreibtisch* by the German cabinetmakers. They were decorated with gold, silver, semi-precious stones, ivory, coral and amber. This term held even after the cabinet evolved into the form of *kunstschränk* and became as precious as the contents it held.

In Italy, curiosity cabinets, or *studiolo* as they were originally known, grew in complexity and richness of decoration. They had a significant role

to play in the resulting evolution of intellectual curiosity that led to scientific discoveries. Every possible technique and innovation was used to further embellish the cabinet. Those who engaged in such innovations gained status and the furniture makers were given new titles throughout Europe: cabinetmaker, *ébéniste*, *ebanista*, and *tischler*. Many different crafts were involved in the adornment of cabinets: the gold and silver smith; the lapidary cutter of cameos; intaglios (incised carving); *pietra dura* (semi precious stone inlay); amber and coral; the ivory engraver; the sculptor; painter; bronze worker and lastly the embroiderer.

Marquetry is a technique of applying a decorative pattern to the surface of a wooden carcass using veneers of differently coloured



Boulle and ebony two door cabinet with marble top and ormolu mounts

woods, ivory, mother-of-pearl and other materials. It was first practised in Italy, Germany and the Netherlands and was introduced to France in the early 17th century and to England in the latter part of the century via Holland where a characteristic burr and floral form developed.

Boulle work is a type of marquetry consisting of tortoiseshell, brass and pewter, was perfected in France by André Charles Boulle (1642-1732), although it was already used in both Italy and Flanders. Boulle work consists of cutting out a design from a sheet of tortoiseshell and gluing it to a sheet of brass. This creates a *recto* or *première partie*, with a brass pattern set in the tortoiseshell background and a *verso* or *contrepatrie*, in which the tortoiseshell pattern is set in the brass background.

Tortoiseshell, first used as a furniture veneer in antiquity, is a hard, translucent material. Derived from the carapace, or shell of the small tropical hawksbill turtle, it is a mottled yellow and brown colour. It is cut into thin plates and when heated it can be moulded to a desired shape. The veneer is frequently backed with foil or coloured pigments to enhance the richness of colour. Pewter, mother-of-pearl or stained bone were also used.

Boulle work went into decline in France at the beginning of the 18th century with the advent of the Rococo style. Rococo, or *rocaille* as it was known in France, is a decorative style characterised by the use of curves and of asymmetrical forms found in nature, such as rocks, shells, flowers which developed in France in the early 18th century and spread throughout Europe. It features C scrolls and double C scrolls, tortuous serpentine lines combined with elegance, charm and fantasy. It contrasted with the grandiose solemnity of the Baroque style that preceded it.

However, Boulle returned to favour in France during the 1770s as well as in the rest of Europe and was again produced widely well into the 19th century.

André-Charles Boulle was the first great French *ébéniste* (cabinetmaker/furniture maker). Originally, André entered the Académie de Saint-Luc as a painter but by 1664 was established as a marqueteur as well as a painter. He was befriended by Bernini who advised him on designs.

In 1672 Boulle was appointed *Ebéniste du Roi*, but was also referred to as a painter, architect, mosaicist and bronzeworker. He was granted a lodging in the Louvre previously occupied by the French cabinetmaker Jean Macé. Jean Macé's style is characterised by extensive use of ebony veneers, carved or engraved on large Flemish cabinet-on-stands.

Although time consuming, restoration of inlays and boulle work is done on a regular basis at our establishment. As a general rule, it is wise to attend to the restoration sooner rather than later. The small pieces which inevitably lift off the piece can become lost. It is always more

economical and correct to restore using the original pieces. Missing pieces can be replicated and successfully blended in with the original components, if required.

## INLAYS AND BOULLE PIECES THAT WE HAVE RESTORED

The hexagonal Dutch inlay table features floral inlays of various fruitwoods. It was badly restored in the past by someone who had used filler to replace the missing flowers, and had completely over-sanded the feature veneers of the background in several places.

Ivory and ebony feature in the round parquetry (geometrical inlay) occasional table. This table was in reasonably good original condition, but over the years, small pieces had come out and needed replacing. New pieces were inserted in a way that let them blend in with the original work. The whole piece was resealed for protection against the atmosphere. The atmosphere has a negative effect on the glue which holds the various inlay pieces. The resealing process prevents more pieces lifting.

The boulle desk was mostly in its original state. However, large sections of the background brass were becoming loose and some bad previous restorations had to be redone. These raised sections were loosened from the background again and fitted correctly to blend and sit flush with the original work. The 22-ct gold embossed leather insert was replaced with tooling as close to the original as possible. The whole piece was cleaned and re-polished in shellac.

The two-door boulle cabinet needed major renovation to replace loose and missing brass sections and tortoiseshell sections. It needed a general clean up as well to bring it back to its original condition. We always strive for an 'old, yet in good condition' appearance.

A 1770 French ebony and brass mantel clock was in poor condition with half of the brass having fallen off the clock. About 20 percent of the brass was completely missing. The making of the brass pieces and the antiquing of the brass pieces to match them with the originals took the most time. Full restoration was required and then it was re-polished using traditional authentic polishing methods.

Our respect for the original craftsmen is renewed whenever we work on such pieces. The painstaking, intricate processes and the astounding beauty of each piece are a strong reminder of the expertise and artistry of these early master cabinetmakers. Inlay and boulle restorations are not easy, but the reward is seeing them resplendent in their original condition, ready for the next 100 years of good service ■

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Boulle and ebony twin pedestal desk with 22 ct gold embossed leather insert

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